Understanding and Leading Team Members

By Joseph D. Launi, PMP

Years ago, as a young project manager, I attended a technical conference in Washington, DC, USA. I decided to attend a talk presented by Hall of Fame coach, Joe Gibbs, the former head coach of the Washington Redskins. He began his presentation by stating that professional football, like many professions, was a people-oriented business and how he learned how important it was to properly motivate his players. You would think that with the big money players are making that motivating them would be relatively easy, but he found just the opposite to be true. One year he decided to purchase two, large La-Z-Boy® recliners and placed them right in the middle of the locker room at Redskins Park, located at the time in Reston, Virginia, USA. He proclaimed that every week, following Sunday's game, the coaching staff would proclaim the offensive and defensive players of the week. The reward for obtaining this honor was that only the winning players would be allowed to sit in the recliner all week after practice and during team meetings. **Only** the winning players were allowed to sit in the recliners during the week. This set off a flurry of competition between the players, especially on game days. Dexter Manley, for example, would come running off the field after sacking the quarterback, screaming: "That chair is mine this week!" Darrell Green, the Hall of Fame cornerback, would come to the sideline after an interception, challenging Dexter that **HE** would be the one owning the chair that week! These were well-paid, highly skilled athletic machines who, even among fanatical fans at RFK stadium, were mostly interested in where they would be sitting that week! Coach Gibbs taught me that human behavior was rarely predictable and always fascinating.

Motivation, worker behavior, and efficiency studies have been conducted since the industrial revolution. Management scientists like Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg, and David McClelland all conducted studies in an attempt to better understand what truly motivates the average worker. This paper attempts to build on the works of these scientists and expand on their findings in an effort to further understand how to tap into the human psyche and position our project team members to be increasingly focused and productive. Additional studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and even my own informal survey of project managers and team members will be discussed. Finally, I'll provide some lessons learned for every manager and recommend some actions that you can take to capitalize on these lessons to create a truly satisfying and productive project environment.

Traditional Theories

As managers we often find ourselves delegating work as a standard operating procedure. Our expectation is that our team is getting paid, so of course they will accept and execute the work we assign to them. As professionals, we expect this work to be done in the highest quality manner, yet we're often disappointed when the result does not meet our expectations. Why is this? Steven Covey, in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People®*, states, "One must seek to first understand and

then to be understood." For my own purpose, I've turned this around to state, "to be understood we must seek to understand." How can we possibly understand this missed expectation unless we can understand the person who performed the work? Once we can understand the worker, then we can properly motivate the worker. "To motivate, we must seek to appreciate."

Abraham Maslow developed his famed "Hierarchy of Needs." As depicted below (Figure 1), he stated that everyone exists somewhere on the pyramid of needs. To meet our most basic needs, we must have food, water, safety, and our health. It's only when these minimum needs have been met can we even begin to search for more sophisticated needs such as love, relationships, and a solid, well-formed sense of self-respect and self-esteem. Finally, we all hope to reach the point of total self-actualization — the "nirvana" of living life, for at this point we are in complete harmony with ourselves and the world around us. We have a well-developed moral compass and the confidence in our abilities to solve problems and positively influence others. We are committed to our work and our lifestyle without the need to be judgmental of others. Obtaining and maintaining self-actualization is difficult and often fleeting. Rarely do we enter and stay in complete self-actualization, because life throws us curve balls that can send us down the pyramid for the subsequent climb back up to the top. Most of us are fortunate if we can maintain the self-esteem level within the pyramid; it is at this level we want to find all of our team members. For example, professional athletes find a positive correlation between their level of confidence and their performance in their sport; that said, this confidence can only be maintained when the lower levels of the pyramid are strong and sturdy.
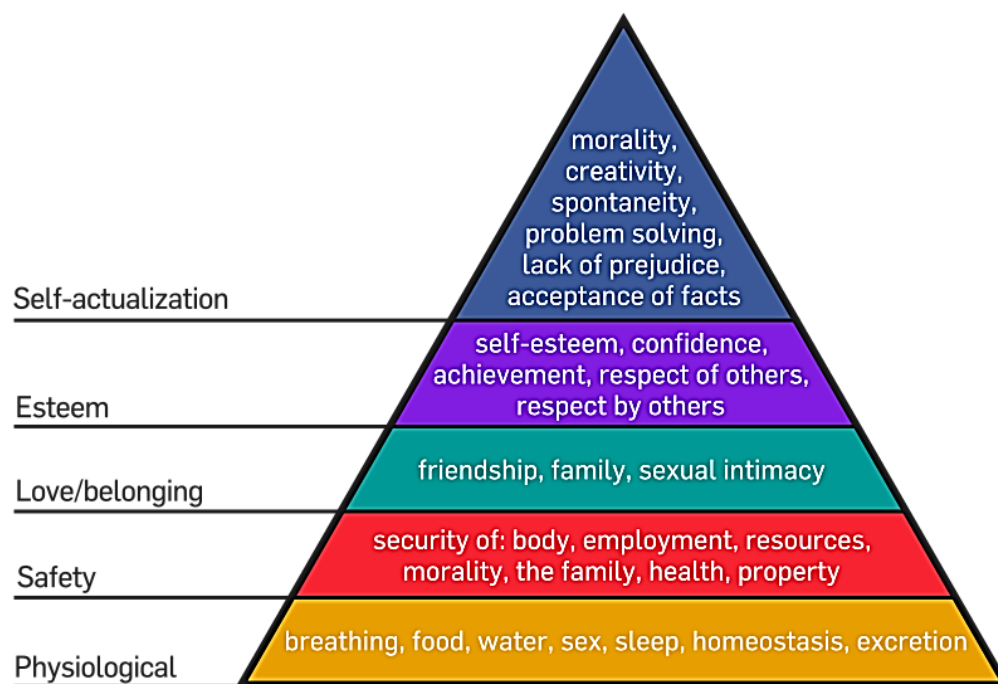

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierachy of Needs

Frederick Herzberg developed his theory on motivation and hygiene in 1959 and was one of the first theorists to state that money **was not** a motivating factor. He stated that workers needed and were often forced to tolerate "hygiene" factors, such as company policy, supervision, and working conditions but what truly excited and motivated workers were the opportunities to achieve, excel, and be recognized for these achievements on the job. Subsequently, these opportunities would lead to increased job satisfaction, responsibilities, and organizational advancement.

David McClelland also addressed the need for achievement but also found that workers found increasing job satisfaction when they were positioned to actually influence the way a job was performed. This need for power and the enjoyment that workers obtained when they could affiliate with like-minded workers also led to increased job satisfaction and improved job performance.

More recent studies, performed by MIT on behalf of the Federal Reserve Board, have made some fascinating, albeit, not so surprising findings. These studies showed that performance actually decreases when paying sizable financial incentives for complicated tasks requiring conceptual creative thinking. Financial incentives are quite effective, though, for relatively simple tasks that have a clear cause and effect, such as completing administrative or routine activities. These studies demonstrated that when workers feel they are paid fairly, they are then free to concentrate on accomplishing the work to the highest standard possible.   Daniel Pink, former speech writer for former Vice President Al Gore and now noted author on motivation, noted that team members feel the most comfortable and perform better when positioned under the following three criteria:

- **Autonomy:** the opportunity to self-direct their work. This allows team members to exercise their creativity and problem-solving skills.

- **Mastery:** the opportunity to get better and become subject matter experts in a chosen area of expertise.

- **Purpose:** the opportunity to make a contribution to the betterment of the common good. This sense of purpose supports McGregor's Theory Y management approach, which states that team members want to impact the mission of the organization and provide recognizable value to that mission.

Motivation and Morale Survey Results

To this point, little has been said about the role of rewards and recognition programs. Historically, there is simply little correlation between financial rewards, such as salary and bonus programs, and a real noticeable increase in performance. I decided to undertake my own informal study and take these findings to the next level by asking the question: What do managers and executives need to do to reward team members and encourage the right behaviors that will lead to improved performance, better results, and greater morale? I sent surveys over 1000 managers and team members to address this question and received 118 responses. In addition, I addressed and discussed similar questions to

over 300 project managers attending my numerous project management training classes, and the results are very consistent. Let's take a look at the questions, answers, and my conclusions in the following tables.

1. I feel considerable excitement when I receive:				
	Don't Agree	Somewhat Agree	Totally Agree	No Answer
My regular salary pay	44%	45%	8%	3%
My bonus pay	6%	34%	48%	12%
A compliment for a job well done.	2%	19%	79%	1%

Conclusion: Receiving our salary clearly DOES NOT generate the same excitement as that which comes from recognizable success in performing the job.   This reaffirms Herzberg's theory that the opportunity to achieve outweighs the financial incentives. Project managers and team members I speak with consider their compensation, including bonuses, an "entitlement" rather than a reward. If the objective is to build morale and improve performance, financial rewards are clearly not the answer.

2. I tend to perform better on the job when:				
	Don't Agree	Somewhat Agree	Totally Agree	N/A
My work related confidence is high.	1%	19%	80%	0%
I'm passionate about my work.	2%	8%	90%	0%
My personal life is going well.	2%	36%	62%	0%
I'm compensated what I feel I'm worth.	6%	42%	52%	0%

Conclusion: Performance is higher when:

   (1) We are confident and passionate about our work

   (2) Our personal life is going well

   (3) We are paid fairly

Again, there is little correlation between higher pay and increased performance. Like Daniel Pink in his book *Drive* stated, "team members simply want to be paid fairly" but to increase performance, they must be confident and passionate about their assignments.   It is interesting that perceived performance tends to dip when we feel we are paid more than our worth. This may have more to do with personal expectations rather than the realistic perceptions held by our colleagues.

3. Which type of bonus program excites YOU most?	
Bonus paid against YOUR success.	58%
Bonus paid against TEAM success.	42%

4. Which type of reward/bonus would best help you feel GREAT about yourself and the organization in which you work?	
Total monetary reward.	44%
A personally customized reward/bonus package to include gifts, vacations, college scholarships for your family members, etc.	56%

5. Given the choice, which type of reward/bonus option would you choose?	
Total monetary reward.	53%
A personally customized reward/bonus package to include gifts, vacations, college scholarships for your family members, etc.	47%

Conclusion 1: In project management we stress the importance of the team and the value the team has to effectively deliver the project's product. This importance goes out the window when it comes to our personal compensation. We would prefer to be compensated against our own performance rather than against the performance of our colleagues on our team. This may be due to our entrepreneurial spirit, which encourages us to be rewarded against our own efforts rather than those of our competitors.

Conclusion 2: Over 50% of those who responded to this study admitted that a personally customized reward/bonus package would help them feel great about themselves and the organizations they work for. Again, financial rewards do not consistently lead to higher morale and improved performance; that said, given the choice, we would prefer the cash so we can exercise our independence and choose what **we** would like to do with our reward. Although cash rewards may increase our choices, it may not improve our morale or provide enough incremental motivation to increase performance.

Lessons Learned

Now that we understand the study's findings, let's summarize these findings and make some conclusions:

- We all exist somewhere on Maslow's pyramid. Ideally, we would like our team members to have a high level of self-esteem.

- Our team members typically find satisfaction with achievement, recognition, work itself, affiliation, and the ability to influence (power)

- Excessive financial incentive programs do not deliver exceptional performance. Pay workers fairly and consider other ways to motivate them, such as independent work, training, recognition of expertise, and the opportunity to share in the project's success.

- "Soft rewards" (a pat on the back) can be very effective in maintaining morale.

- Self-rated performance is higher when the team member is confident and passionate about his or her work.

- Self-rated performance is higher when the team member's personal life is in order.

- Team members prefer to be rewarded based on the factors they can directly control.

- Team members would enjoy a mixture of both monetary and "materialistic" reward/bonus programs, but given the option, will typically choose a monetary reward.

Summary

The next step is to apply these principals and take the bold step to implement an approach that for many will seem as innovative yet extremely risky. As leaders we must focus on understanding each individual worker, his or her passions, personal circumstances, and his or her value systems and apply them in a unique way to staff projects with the "right" team members and reward and encourage individuals against the lessons learned above. Here are some recommendations:

- Organizations must resist offering financial incentives, thinking they will result in improved performance.

- Start recognizing and rewarding passion, commitment, independent thinking, and leadership — not just project success!

- Look to hire (or acquire) team members who have demonstrated these traits and are excited to have the opportunity to solve the client/sponsor's problem. Don't jump to acquire the most technical/competent person, but strive to obtain the most passionate team member.

- Seek to understand the whole person, NOT just the team member. Each employee's personal life and personal situation is unique and he or she **does** bring it to work.

- For maximum benefit, rewards and bonus programs must be customized to each individual to include a balance of personal, materialistic, and financial rewards.

- Employees must be willing to allow management to understand them outside the scope of their immediate job.

Organizations have gotten into the habit of handing out cash as part of an effort to retain workers and/or balance compensation. Management is wrong in thinking that these programs actually motivate workers to succeed and improve their morale. True motivation comes from within the

individual worker. Enlightened management will work to understand those intrinsic motivators and seek to satisfy those motivators.   Especially during difficult economic times, management can't afford big bonus programs and must be more creative in their efforts to retain and motivate their team members.

To this end its important to understand that I <u>am not</u> encouraging reward without merit. Everyone is not entitled to a trophy. When performance is clearly lacking, it must be discussed with the team member and dealt with humbly, honestly, and professionally. Lateral thinking and working to understand the root of the problem may help improve performance. Or, maybe the team member is simply in the wrong job.

About the Author

For over 30 years, Joseph (Joe) D. Launi, PMP, President and CEO of Project Management Experts, has worked tirelessly to develop a solid reputation for delivering successful projects and improving project management processes. Mr. Launi is a proven project management executive with progressive experience, which encompasses project management office (PMO) leadership; development and management of PMO policies, best practices, and methodologies; development and presentation of project management training; implementation of project management software solutions; information technology project and program oversight; research and development into motivation and morale building programs; and, profit and loss management of various consulting practice areas.

Mr. Launi has published numerous works in areas such as software implementation and project planning. Project Management Experts specializes in providing organizations with the skills, knowledge, and experience needed to improve their project management competency.